

THE CONFERENCE AT JERUSALEM.

– MAY 23. – ACTS 15:1-6,22-29. –

"Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they." – Acts 15:11.

CIRCUMCISION was given to Abraham and his posterity as a sign or mark by which they attested faith in the divine promises. It was obligatory upon every Jew who would maintain his relationship to the divine promises, and it is still obligatory upon that nation. (Gen. 17:14.) We are not to forget, however, that a Jew, no less than a Gentile, is reckoned as losing earthly nationality in becoming a Christian. To all such, "old things pass away, all things become new." They are thenceforth "new creatures" in Christ Jesus, members of the "holy nation."

Inasmuch as circumcision in the flesh as a mark in the flesh had been observed for over eighteen centuries by all recognized as God's people, it should not surprise us to find that some of the early Christians, previously Jews, concluded that it was still obligatory upon all who had become children of God. All the broad distinctions between the Law Covenant and the New Covenant were not clearly distinguished at first, – even the apostles appear for a time not to have distinguished clearly on all points. Nevertheless, the Lord had held them, as the special guides of the new dispensation, and had prevented their making any declaration on the subject, until in his due time the matter was brought clearly to their attention; and then they were guided aright.

The Apostle Paul seems to have been the first to get a broadly comprehensive view of the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the New Covenant provisions; and we are not to forget that he was probably helped miraculously to this clearness of perception by being granted "visions and revelations" more than all the others.

Barnabas, his companion in the missionary tour, was naturally the first to share this knowledge, and was evidently in full sympathy with the Apostle Paul in resisting the teachings of certain Jews who attempted to Judaize the erstwhile Gentiles who chiefly constituted the Antioch Church. That that Church was in good spiritual health is evidenced by the fact that they were anxious to have the truth, whatever it might be. Accordingly they requested that Paul and Barnabas and certain of their company might consult with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem respecting the propriety of circumcision and the general observance of the Mosaic law on the part of those who were not Israelites by birth. And this plan was followed.

It was now nearly twenty years since our Lord's resurrection; and as a result of the efforts put forth by believers, Christians were now to be found in little groups throughout Asia-Minor and Syria. The brethren made use of the journey to Jerusalem as an opportunity to refresh the hearts of God's people in the various cities enroute, and these fellow Christians in turn gladly entertained them as members of the Lord's body; – setting a good example of hospitality.

Arrived at Jerusalem, they were warmly welcomed by the apostles and friends of the truth who had heard much concerning their missionary journey and its good results. Evidently, before they got to a statement of the real object of their visit, a class similar to those who had gone down to Antioch took exceptions to the method which the brethren had used amongst the Gentiles. They probably inquired, Were all the believing Gentiles whom you evangelized commanded to be circumcised, and instructed that they should keep the law of Moses? This opened up the question at once, and led to the announcement that the settlement of this question was the very object of their visit. Accordingly a council of the apostles and elders was called.

Verses 7-21 give probably but a small portion of the discussion. It would seem that the question, What is the responsibility of converts amongst the Gentiles toward the law of Moses? had never come up for

consideration previously, and the apostles, it would appear, were without very positive convictions until they began to discuss the subject. Peter, one of the oldest of the disciples, and a man of strong character, pointed out that God had made choice of him as the one who should be first to open the gospel door to the Gentiles; how Cornelius was the first of these converts, and how God poured out the holy spirit upon him and thus recognized him as a son and joint-heir with Christ, while as yet he was uncircumcised, thus proving that circumcision was not essential to divine reconciliation and sonship in the household of faith under the New Covenant. He doubtless also called attention to the fact that our Lord, who instructed them to teach all nations and to baptise those who believed, gave no instructions in reference to circumcision or any of the commands of the Mosaic law. He argued, therefore, that they had no right to put upon the Gentiles, as a yoke of bondage, the law of Moses, which God had not put upon them, but only upon the Jews, and which the Jews found it impossible to bear, and from which they (believing Jews) had to be liberated through the merit of Christ.

Then Paul and Barnabas told how God had greatly blessed their ministry amongst the Gentiles, performing many miracles, etc., and in every way attesting his blessing upon their work; and yet that work had nothing in it respecting obligation to Moses' law or [R2158 : page 154] God's command to Abraham and his seed – circumcision.

James, our Lord's brother, was the president or chairman of the meeting, and after hearing the foregoing coincided with Peter, Paul and Barnabas, adding to the argument by citing from the prophets evidences (1) that the Gentiles would be received into divine favor and (2) that the reception of the Gentiles was not to make of them Jews, but that, on the contrary, God had certain blessed provisions for the Jews to be fulfilled subsequently, – "*After this*, I will return and build again the tabernacle of David which is *fallen down*." Since Israel is to be recognized in the future by the Lord as distinct from the Gentiles, it follows that the particular national mark which

distinguishes Jews from Gentiles was not to be abolished, – was not to be made general amongst Gentiles, even after they believed and became God's people.

The results of the conference were satisfactory to all present, and it was decided to send a statement of the results to the Antioch Church, both by writing and orally by Judas and Silas.

Probably only the substance of the letter is given in the brief recorded statement; but it is sufficient to show clearly that those who claim that the apostles were confused upon the subject so as almost to make a split in the Church, are greatly mistaken, for in so many words they positively declare that those who went out from them and troubled the Church at Antioch, almost unsettling their faith and peace with the statement, "Ye must be circumcised and keep the law," were not representatives of the apostles, and had received no such commandment or teaching from them. It is refreshing and strengthening to our faith to note that the Lord's promise, specially to bless and use the apostles and keep them from error in their teaching, was remarkably fulfilled, as in this case. Our Lord's words to them were, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven;" in other words, I will so particularly direct you that you will make no mistakes in respect to what you will command and in respect to what you will forbid.

The statement, "It seemed good to the holy spirit and to us," should not be lightly supposed to signify that the apostles "guessed at" the mind of the spirit, nor that they put their own judgment on a par with that of the holy spirit. We are to remember that they had special gifts of the spirit which guided them into the understanding of the Lord's will, and they merely assert here that not only was it the guidance of the holy spirit, but that they themselves were so in sympathy that they rejoiced that the holy spirit had not put the bondage of the law upon the Gentile converts.

The Christians at Antioch were already well instructed concerning the terms of the New Covenant, faith and the various added virtues and graces presented to us in the Pauline epistles. Such matters were not entered into by the council at Jerusalem nor referred to in the letter which they wrote in reply. The inquiry was merely respecting the obligation of the converts to be circumcised and keep the other features of the Mosaic law. The answer ignored every feature of that law, except four points; and the first three of these were mentioned no doubt as a basis of common fellowship between those who had been Jews and those who had been Gentiles; namely, (1) abstaining from meats that had been offered in sacrifice to idols; (2) abstaining from animal food that had not been killed after the manner of the Jews; (3) abstaining from the eating of blood. It would be almost impossible for those who had been reared as Jews to ignore these three points, and if the converts from the Gentiles did not observe them it would be a constant barrier to their social intercourse. Furthermore, the observance of the first restriction would be a benefit to those who were coming out of Gentile darkness, in that it would break them off from old customs which might be injurious. It was the custom among Gentiles at that time that much of the meat sold in their markets should first be offered in sacrifice to some idol. The Apostle Paul shows, however (1 Cor. 8:4), that, as an idol is nothing, the offering of the meat in the presence of nothing could do no harm to those who were able to understand the situation aright; but to others it might seem like sacrilege. He therefore advised the Church to abstain from eating meat offered to idols, lest it [R2159 : page 154] should make a brother to offend. The restriction as to the method of killing animals was that it should not be by strangulation, which would leave the blood in the veins, but by the Jewish method of bleeding them to death, which extracts the blood. Abstinence from the eating of blood in any form has probably also a sanitary reason back of it, in addition to a typical significance; for "the life is in the blood."

The mention of fornication was probably considered wise, for altho it should be understood as part of the law of Christ, yet

nevertheless, since this evil was very common at that time amongst the Gentiles and in some cases even a part of their religious service, it was thought well to specify it.
